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A Cockroach in the Curriculum.

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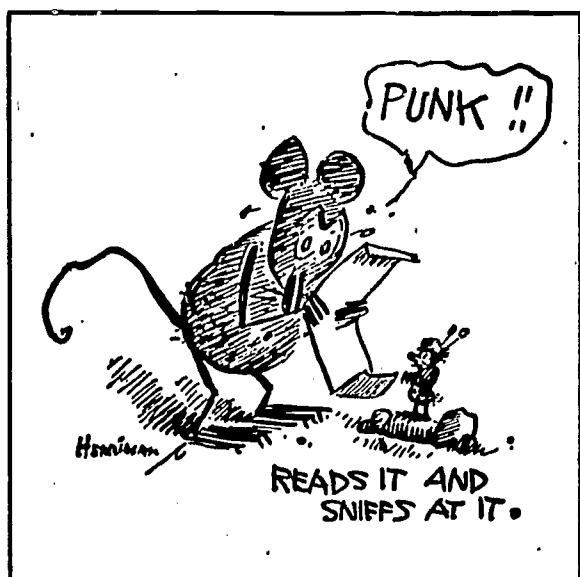
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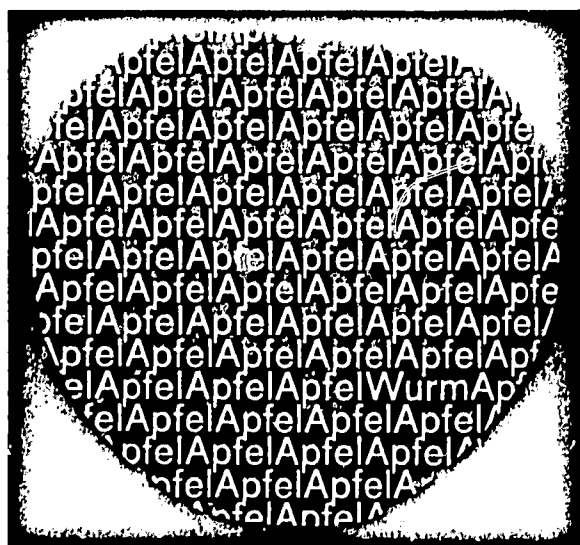
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"Archy and Mehitabel," a collection of 48 newspaper columns by Don Marquis on the aspirations and foibles of man, can be used effectively to spark the interests of today's students. Marquis' delightful dialogue between the humorous and learned cockroach, Archy, and his cliché-ridden but lovable friend, Mehitabel the cat, are written in free verse. Archy, a frustrated artist and self-styled revolutionary muses elaborately on his own fate and comments on the peculiarities and pretenses of his fellow creatures. Archy's messages are heavy with literary and historical allusions. His writings range from angry outbursts on poverty through practical comments on the art-versus-utility theme to satirical references on middle-aged mothers of today. This little cockroach can entertain students of all ages and encourage them to continue grappling with today's problems. (JB)



November 1968 Vol. 5, No. 3

## MEDIA & METHODS



### How to read this issue

(Forsythias in autumn? Read on . . .) "If poetry comes not as naturally as leaves to a tree it had better not come at all." Words of Keats to John Taylor in 1818. Which of your students would not attest that poetry study is sledging rocks for a gram of precious metal that might, might be buried inside? Which of them would not maintain that the study of poetry is basically academic, the very opposite of "natural"? Last month we suggested tactics for getting Shakespeare out of the ground and up on his feet. This issue offers three relatively untapped poetic forms which just might put all that precious metal nearer the surface. Haiku, typographical poetry and concretism offers ways of getting poetry out of the ground and, in this case, up on the wall. **Poems on the Wall** by David Burmester (pg. 22) utilizes one very ancient poetic form (haiku) and two relatively modern forms (typographical and concrete poetry) and connects them with the overhead projector to provide an exciting and involving way of teaching poetry. Haiku and typographical poetry are relatively well known. Concrete poetry, however, is new by contrast; we have attempted to give you in this issue a feel for its possibilities. Adorning this month's cover is an example of concrete poetry by Mary Ellen Solt entitled "Forsythia." The poet comments on her work in "An Anthology of Concrete Poetry" (Something Else Press, 1967): "The design of 'Forsythia' is made from the letters of the name of the flowering shrub and their equivalents in the Morse code. The text is part of the poem." Your first reaction probably is—That's a poem? It's certainly not the usual sort of poem. Any meaningful definition of poetry would, however, have to count it in. It's not prose; it's not a painting; but it is verbal. What is unique about it is the intimate connection between it and the page it's printed on; that is its form and meaning. It is concrete, visual as well as conceptual, in much the same way as the experiments of Cummings are. And therein lies the special appeal of typographical and concrete poetry for today's kids. They exploit their characteristic visual propensity and have a better chance, thereby, than the old verbal venerables. The overhead is particularly crucial in this context, for it permits a group of students an almost tactile experience. The private fidgeting that usually transpires between a student and a bleeding purple ditto sheet is replaced by a public image in which all can participate simultaneously. As Mr. Burmester suggests, this treatment of poetry produces results which "are sometimes pleasing, sometimes stimulating and always unpredictable." What more could you ask from poetry study?

**35** We would have been tempted to print **Visuals and Verse** by Irving Weiss twice if space had permitted, because to read it once would be an injustice. It is one of those essays which when cursorily read appear needlessly complex, but when delved more patiently yield lucid and important insights. There is a scarcity of depth studies in mass media in education journals—especially since the unfortunate demise of the NCTE monthly, "Studies in the Mass Media"—a scarcity complemented by a tremendous need. Scarcer yet are articles which emerge from the fog of speculation and suggest methods for probing the media monster. "Visuals and Verse" is both—a rationale and a means.

**46** **Cockroach in the Curriculum** by Winfield Carlough describes a whimsical book of neo-fables written by a poet whose essence has transmigrated into a cockroach ("gods i am pent in a cockroach / i with the soul of a dante / am mate and companion of fleas"). His musings on his own fate and his pointed commentary on his fellow creatures can lighten your students' curriculum overload in more ways than one.

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# a cockroach in the curriculum

BY WINFIELD CARLOUGH A most adaptable creature, the cockroach. Fossils 250 million years old tell us that he has survived well into the Twentieth Century. This information would greatly please Archy, a humorous; learned, and soulful cockroach descendant, created 50 years ago by Don Marquis (pronounced mar' kwis). Archy deserves to carry on his ancestral longevous tradition, and you can bring him to life in the classroom through a short, funny, lovely lavender paperback titled *archy and mehitabel*. (Dolphin, 95¢ INFOCARD 97).

Oops, proper names should be capitalized, you say? Archy was an artist, a transmigrated poet who *had* to communicate. Technically, he did so by hurling himself head first upon the typewriter keys. His diminutive size, therefore, precluded use of the shift key, hence the elimination of capital letters and punctuation (such esoteric impediments as parentheses, asterisks, dollar and percentage signs). People, Archy was wont to complain, "are always interested in technical details." His first typewritten words best explain his laborious effusions *and* his relevance to students today: "expression is the need of my soul."

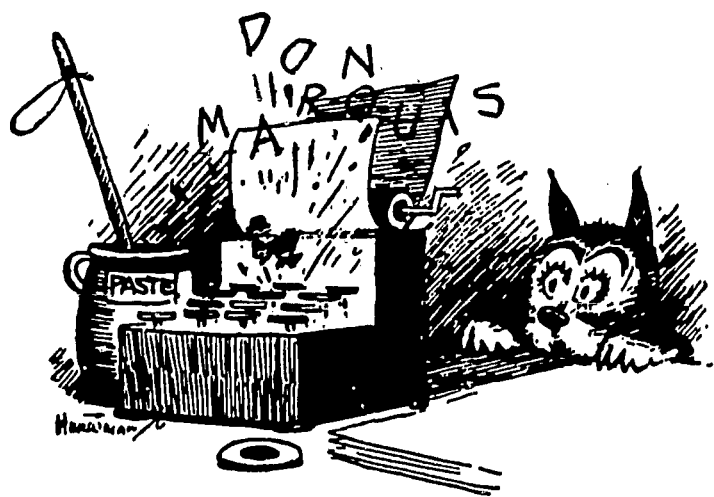
*archy and mehitabel* happily resists strict classification. It crosses the borders of school disciplines and a place can easily be found for it in English, history, philosophy, sociology, art, and religion classes; in elementary schools, high schools, and colleges. Its author was a newspaper reporter and the book is a collection of 48 of his columns, written as free verse narratives which are both a spoof and a genuine use of that form. Marquis had a vital, encyclopedic mind, and *archy and mehitabel* embraces a wide range of topics, but it is, most of all, a book of humor: funny, sad, bawdy, pathetic, satirical, wistful, kind and tough.

For the past two years I have used it as the introductory work in my seventh grade English classes. Students respond very well to the idea of animal as man, which inevitably leads to consideration of man as animal. The cricket with his incessant "cheer up cheer up" is cuttingly put down by Archy as a senseless and insincere optimist. Warty Bliggens the toad is a favorite character. He thinks himself the center of the world, and his conceit is so great that toadstools are grown for him to relax under. When Archy asks

"He did not see us, and we watched him. He would climb painfully upon the framework of the (typewriter) and cast himself with all his force upon a key, head downward, and his weight and the impact of the blow were just sufficient to operate the machine, one slow letter after another." archy and mehitabel







him what makes him so important that the cosmos revolves around him, Warty replies, in a line that now sounds like a parody of President Kennedy's maxim, "ask rather what the universe has done to deserve me."

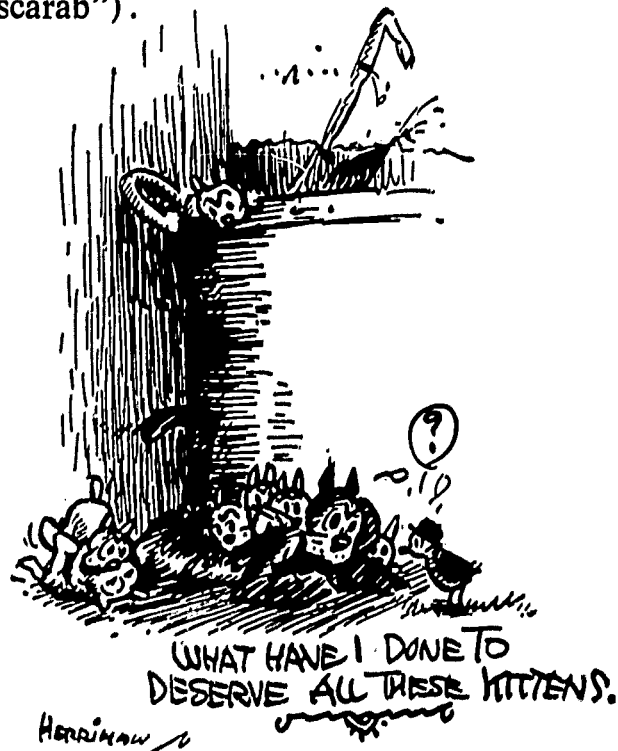
Archy is an incisive delineator of the sham, the hypocrisy, the pretense of life—and of its ironies. A seemingly human hunter saves a tender lamb from slaughter by a wolf, indignantly rails against such bloody creatures, then gently kills the lamb and piously dines upon her. Aesop would have added THE MORAL: never trust a man in wolf's clothing.

The vain lightning bug, facetiously dubbed Broadway, is reduced when reminded that there are no thunder claps to accompany his flashes. Almost mercifully, he is saved from considering this deflating criticism because Mehitabel the cat eats him.

Ah, Mehitabel! The Bohemian, the innocent, the heart of gold, a four-legged exponent of situation ethics, an undomesticated feline composed of clichéd elements, yet an uninhibited original nonetheless. "i have had adventures," she informs Archy, "but i have never been an adventuress." She, too, is a thwarted artist, a dancer whose quest is hampered by the birth of "one damned kitten after another." Though she may sometimes question her fate, she joyfully lives "toujours gai," her free-spirited motto. Well-experienced in life's plusses and minuses, she can admit matter-of-factly that "it was being abducted so many times as spoiled me for a wife," but she can then happily recover with a hearty "wotthehell wotthehell . . . the life i led was the life i liked and there s pep in the old dame yet."

Beyond its value as a single work, *archy and mehitabel* can readily be fitted into a larger unit, such as "Animal Literature—Metaphor of Man." A list of related works—and forms—is limitless and easily compiled: almost any mythology, Homer's *Odyssey*, Aesop's *Fables*, Chaucer's "Nun's Priest's Tale" (of Chanticleer, Pertelote, and the fox), *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Gulliver's Travels*, *Alice in Wonderland*, *Uncle Remus* (Marquis once worked for Joel Chandler Harris), Kipling's animal stories, Kafka's "The Metamorphosis," *The Hairy Ape*, *Thurber's Dogs*, *Animal Farm*, and comics such as *Pogo* and *Peanuts*.

Stylistically, *archy and mehitabel* is filled with poetic devices and figures of speech, but they are fun to discover and not onerous exercises. In an interview with an Egyptian mummy, Archy alliteratively refers to the embalmed pharaoh as "old tan and tarry," "divine drouth," and "poor prune" (and is himself called a "scatter-footed scarab").



Rhyming internally, Archy describes hell, as having been seen by another cockroach:

through the horrid gloom he  
saw things with wings flying  
and dropping and dying they veered . . .

Similes abound:

. . . the pendant moon in the leafless tree  
clings and sways like a golden bat  
. . . i m as full of  
death as a drug store

A merry flea imitates Mrs. Malaprop when he asserts:

. . . i never took much stock in being  
scared of hypodermic propositions or  
hypothetic injections . . .

Marquis' vocabulary and literary and historical references are pleasures to play with. Because they are different and hardly used, students delight in adding words to their vocabularies such as "corybantic,"

"austral," "ichneumon," "gehenna," and "desiderata." More functional and valid are "ribald," "pedantic," "lupine," "inveigh," "ectoplasm," and "apocalyptic."

Marquis leads one willingly to library reference works. Properly encouraged, students enjoy adding names to their store of historical knowledge—or to their lore of trivia—names such as the Emperor Valerian, Gambrinus (a mythical king, said to have invented beer), Pythagoras, Boreas, the Mermaid Tavern crew of Jonson, Burbage, Beaumont and whatsisname, Mithradates, Francois Villon, Lawrence Sterne, Jo Jefferson and Modjeska, and Edward the Black Prince.

Consider the following Archy-announced aphorisms:

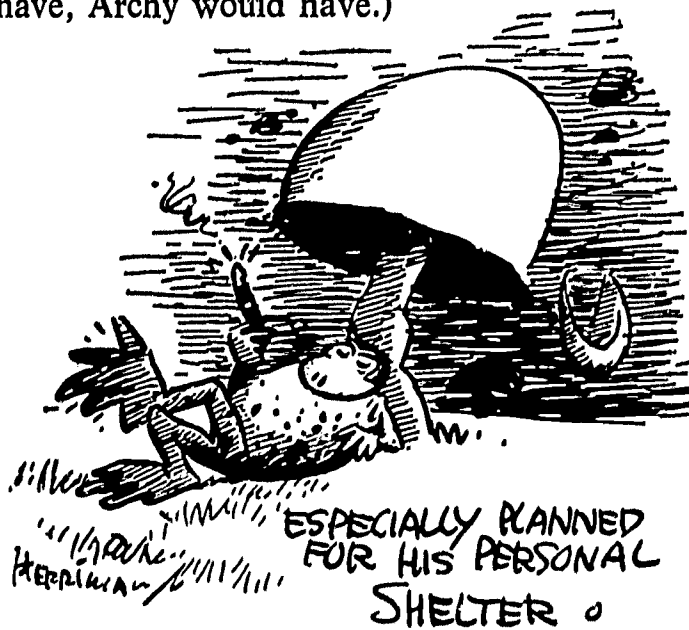
procrastination is the  
art of keeping  
up with yesterday

an optimist is a guy  
that has never had  
much experience

many a man spans his  
children for  
things his own  
father should have  
spanked out of him

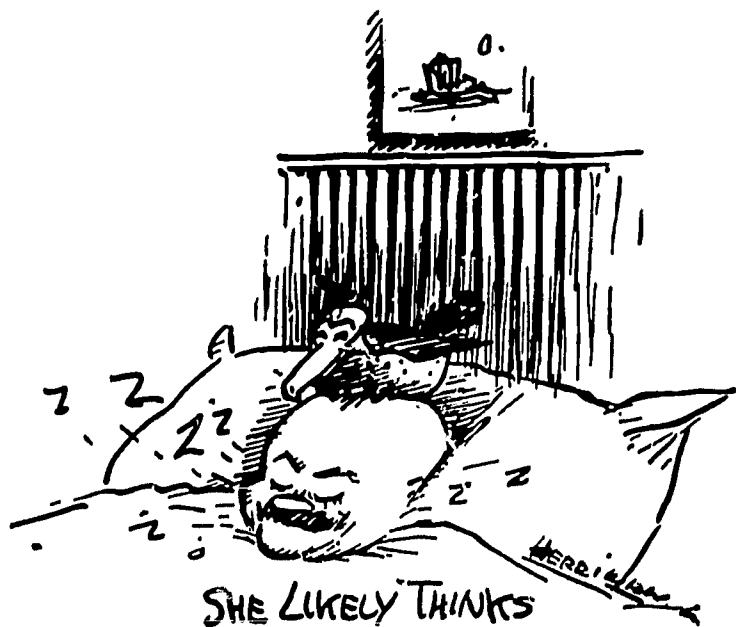
Is there not much meat here to ask students to feed upon in written exercises?

I almost hesitate to suggest it, but consider, too, the obvious joy students could have learning punctuation. (It's not a sacrilege to punctuate and capitalize; if he could have, Archy would have.)



As for Archy and his friends in broader relation within the humanities, if the goal of education is discovery—that is, letting students solve problems and issues by themselves—then Don Marquis certainly presents a maximum number of problems and issues.

Are newspaper columns, several decades old, topical? Is Jimmy Breslin or Russell Baker topical? "pity the poor spiders" Marquis/Archy requests, in a sympathetic tale about a poverty-stricken spider whose husband deserted her and their daughters. Her dialect is as Irish



SHE LIKELY THINKS  
SHE'S NESTING  
ON HER ROCKY  
ISLAND HOME.

as any Lower East Side tenement mother of the Twenties, but her plight is the same as that of a Negro or Puerto Rican Harlemitte of the Sixties.

Is the middle-aged mod mother of today any different from the matron Archy describes?

the old fashioned  
grandmother who used  
to wear steel rimmed  
glasses and make  
everybody take opodeldoc  
has now got a new  
set of ox glands and  
is dancing the black bottom

His revolutionary spirit is most appealing to the "Now Generation." When he declares war against humans and their inhuman poisons, the teacher will not have to substitute "electric cattle prodders," "flame-throwers," or "police dogs" for "insecticides." "Black Flag" and "Raid" easily translate into "napalm" and "atomic bomb."

Archy's loneliness and frustration are ageless.

gods i am pent in a cockroach  
i with the soul of a dante  
am mate and companion of fleas  
i with the gift of a homer  
must smile when a mouse calls me pal  
... i with the tastes of a byron  
expected to live upon garbage  
... i with the soul of a hamlet  
doomed always to wallow in farce

The device of disassociation relieved Marquis of direct responsibility for his views; they were Archy's and Mehitabel's, not his. In achieving this distance he could step back and hear them as themselves, not as extensions of himself. It is a neat shift, and with it he can express his prejudice against the critics and intellectuals who would not accept his work as art; and also against those who considered Archy his finest creation, whereas he hoped to be known for other works. In an inspired episode, Archy listens while Pete the Parrot relates Shakespeare's dilemma of the commercial hack and the creative artist; of the manu-

facturer of bloody, sensational, potboiling, melodramatic hokum who preferred to be a poet, a sonneteer. The art-versus-business conflict, the problem of turning out "what the low brows want" and rationalizing that it pays well and supports the family, is a familiar one. Incidentally, this particular tale does much to humanize Shakespeare for those students who are fearful of him.

Art and beauty is a recurring theme. There is the moth who would rather burn with beauty for a brief moment in a flame than live a long and boring life. A chicken elicits no sympathy when beheaded, yet everyone sentimentalizes over the death of the beautiful oriole. The debate between a spider, who creates lovely, delicate, gossamer filaments, and a trapped fly, who begs for release because he carries germs and righteously rids the world of the weaker human beings, contains the continuous argument between art and utility. In this instance, however, Archy makes us aware of the voraciousness of art through the need of the spider to feed on whatever it wishes to take.

As if the book itself were not enjoyable enough, Columbia Records has issued a long-playing album by the same name (INFOCARD 37). It features David Wayne as the sympathetic narrator/reporter whose typewriter Archy uses; Eddie Bracken, known recently for his Broadway role in *The Odd Couple*, as a mournful-voiced, most appealing Archy; and Carol Channing, of *Hello, Dolly!* fame, as a yowling, lovable Mehitabel. The record company also had the foresight to reproduce E. B. White's delightful essay on the record jacket, as well as some of George Herriman's original cartoon drawings. (Herriman was the creator of *Krazy Kat*, and many more of his illustrations supplement the Dolphin paperback.)

Here, then, is Archy the philosophical cockroach. Like his real-life brothers, he is essentially a nocturnal city creature. Behavior studies show them to be bright insects, and Archy is certainly that. Though clean themselves, cockroaches track about a good bit of human dirt; surely, Archy is no exception. Biologists have discovered that they have a highly-developed alarm system which enables them to quickly scuttle away and remain hidden though alert to danger. This system, based on a quick transmission of communications, has enhanced their survival. Archy is no alarmist, but through his wisdom, tempered anger, jollity, and compassion he does remind us of hidden pains and perils. He, too, transmits simple messages, and he is worthy of survival in our classrooms.

*Ex-adman Winfield Carlough teaches at the Collegiate School in New York City. This is his first appearance in Media and Methods.*

*The illustrations in this article are taken from the book and are the work of Herriman.*